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The Horse-shoe



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THE

# HORSE-SHOE:

A P O E M

SPOKEN BEFORE

THE PHI BETA KAPPA SOCIETY IN CAMBRIDGE,

JULY, 19, 1849,

BY

JOHN BROOKS FELTON.

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## THE HORSE-SHOE.

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JUST over the way, with its front to the street,  
Up one flight of stairs, is a room snug and neat.  
The prospect Mark Tapley right jolly would call ; —  
Three churches, one grave-yard, one bulging brick  
wall,  
Where, raven-like, Science gloats over her wealth,  
And the skeleton grins at the lectures on health.  
The tree by the window has twice hailed the spring,  
Since we circled its trunk our last chorus to sing ;

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Maidens laughed at our shouts, they knew better  
than we,  
And the world clanked its chains as we cried " We  
are free."

Oft as twilight confuses day's sharply drawn line,  
Its branches seem harps to the wind's " Auld Lang  
Syne,"  
And the dance of its shadows the quick springing  
tread  
Of the many all scattered, the one that is dead.

On the wall hangs a Horse-shoe I found in the  
street ;  
'T is the shoe that to-day sets in motion my feet ;  
Though its charms are all vanished this many a  
year,  
And not even my " goody " regards it with fear,  
'T is a comfort, while Europe, to freedom awoke,  
Is chirping like chickens just free from their yolk,

To think Pope and Monarch their kingdoms may  
lose ;  
Yet I hang my subject wherever I choose.

Small though my theme, perchance, if rightly  
sought  
Its rust is stamped with ages' fossilised thought.  
They are but dreamers who, with frenzied eye,  
Gaze on the mountain lifting to the sky, —  
Thrill with vague rapture to the water's call,  
Where hoarse Niagara thunders to its fall.  
But he whom Nature hails her chosen seer,  
And breathes her inmost secrets in his ear,  
Makes the light scratches on the rocky side  
Disclose where swept the glacier-heaving tide, —  
The rounded pebble tell where moaned of yore  
The wind-chased waves in vain to find a shore.

Laugh if you will, who imps nor devils fear,  
Whom dark appals not, phantoms come not near,

Along whose nerves no quick vibrations dart  
As teeming Twilight's shadowy offspring start ;  
Not yours to feel the joy with which I flew  
To snatch the rusty, worn, but lucky shoe.

Oft have I heard them chattering at my door,  
The hags, whose dances beat the shrinking moor ;  
Oft have I sprung from nightmare-haunted rest,  
And gasped an "oro" from my panting breast,  
As forms, that vanished ere the half-shut eye  
With fright could open, from their revels fly.  
Henceforth, good Horse-shoe, vain shall be their ride ;  
Their spells are baffled, and their rage defied.

Yet are there none but witches bent on ill,  
And imps of Hell, the shadowy world that fill ?  
Is naught more potent than my Horse-shoe found,  
To call good spirits from their homes around ?  
Still must I walk in dread of unseen hurt,  
And be all lonely, or by bad begirt ?



The ban-dog howls his portents at the gate,  
And ticks the death-watch his alarm of fate ;  
In all her myriad tongues has Night no voice  
To speak good omens, — bid the heart rejoice ?

And she, to whom all hope, all love had clung,  
And life was vacant when her death-knell rung, —  
Say, why should come the quivering start of fear,  
When she, so fondly cherished, hovers near ?  
Of virtue's likeness do we shrink afraid ?  
Has death a devil of an angel made ?

From scenes like this how glad the Fancy flies,  
Where jocund spirits fill the earth and skies, —  
Where roams the shepherd o'er the vine-clad hill,  
And hears the Naiad murmur in the rill !  
Now tunes his pipes to sing how Venus came  
With fatal joys to crown a shepherd's flame,  
And blest Apollo leads his flocks to graze,  
While forests listen as the master plays !

Or as he sleeps, with noon-tide heat opprest,  
He knows the Dryads watch to shield his rest,  
Starts from his dreams to see, nor feels affright,  
Their trailing garments fading from his sight!

The lovers walk where still the Poplar keeps  
A sister's vigil, and in amber weeps;  
Around, the Hyacinth still sighs, Alas!  
Acantha breathes love's sorrows as they pass:  
The light that steeps the clouds in glittering dyes  
Is Venus laughing through her thin disguise;  
On trees the birds, the conscious stars above,  
All give them welcome, for they once could love.

Harmonious all, no fallen angel strove  
With hostile thunder 'gainst the arms of Jove;  
Hell's gloomy monarch owned superior might,  
And Hell's grave judges spake the doom of Right;  
The Furies shook their torch and scorpion scourge,  
And hissed their snakes, the parricide to urge;

But sable Night to him no spectre brought  
Whose heart was conscious of no guilty thought.

When Fancy thus enrobed with Iris hues  
Her sportive Naiad and her heaven-born Muse,  
Frisked in the sunbeam with her blithesome train,  
And led the dance o'er moon-illumin'd plain,  
Reason to her a willing homage gave,  
Played with his chains, and joyed to be a slave ;  
Pleased through her eyes he saw the flowerets wave,  
Wrought by some god his mistress' gorgeous grave.  
On high old Etna blazing turrets piled, —  
A mother lit them when she sought her child.  
As frantic fled the bark, and chasing gales  
Laid hundred hands on mast and rending sails,  
Vain, open-mouthed, the billows leaped to 'whelm,  
When circling flames showed Castor at the helm.  
The sun is mirrored in a thousand shields,  
And flame-tipt lances shake on bristling fields ; —  
Who fears to follow, where, with nodding crest,  
A god-born hero towers above the rest,

Seeks the front foe, while all a mortal's fears  
Cloud the bright eyes that o'er him watch in tears ?  
Who questions laws the nymph Egeria brings  
Her regal lover by their trysting springs ?  
Who dares the action of a god to blame,  
When Jove his statutes writes in living flame ?

Long looked the Poet ; — tell us, Greece, how  
vain, —  
Speak from thy lonely grot, thy ruined plain, —  
That day again should dawn of heavenly birth,  
And gods and heroes blend with men on earth.  
But hark ! — from land to land the tidings fly, —  
There is one God, his home is in the sky !

Bound in his chains, he heard the echoes ring,  
Leaped from his thrall, and Reason owned his king, —  
One God ; — the lightning darts in vivid light,  
But Jove no longer hurls the red affright ; —  
The morning sun from hill-tops cheers the plain,  
No more Apollo holds the courser's rein ; —

Still spring the flowers, still wave the leafy trees,  
Nor Ceres plants, nor Æolus rules the breeze ; —  
From shrieking caverns startled Echo fled  
With mournful chorus laden, — Pan is dead !

This was the dawning age, the looked-for birth,  
This was its sign, — the gods had left the earth.  
For all the beauty that informed the world,  
The might that shook it, and the wrath that hurled,  
The love that smiled, unseen, in cloud and air, —  
All flew to heaven, and found their centre there.

Amazed, bewildered, Fancy, left alone, —  
The good she wrought with, and the bright, all  
    flown, —  
Shunned with a dazzled eye the streaming light,  
And wailed her bodings in the ear of Night.  
Enwrapped in gloom, her busy thoughts recall  
The mighty captive that had burst her thrall ; —  
What though he mocked her charms and soft caress ?  
She could not win him, — still she might oppress.

Anew her plastic hands the evil mould  
That still was left her from the gods of old :  
The tyrant might of Zeus, Apollo's pest,  
The rage that heaves in Ares' shaggy breast,  
The lust that gloats through Aphrodite's grace,  
And maudlin Bacchus' laugh and wine-flushed face ;  
The craft of Kronos, dire Erinnys' train,  
And kindred Murder, red with reeking stain ;  
The deepest night o'er drear Avernus spread,  
The livid gloom and pallor of the dead ; —  
From these her fingers wrought so foul a crew,  
She shrank in terror from the shapes she drew ;  
To demon life her weird creations swell, —  
Her Heaven unpeopled, she was queen of Hell.

Yet in the new-revealed harmonious plan  
Of God creator, and created man,  
No place was found this hellish brood could claim,  
Children of Evil, faithful to their dame.  
No Furies they, to wield the avenging rod, —  
The judge, rewarder, punisher, was God.

Not theirs in glowing hues to paint the sin, —  
Man heard his devil whisper “ yield ” within ;  
On the same branch his good and evil grew,  
And tempted passion was the tempter too.  
They could not cloak with good their purpose fell, —  
Their flouting standard rose, inscribed “ Rebel.”  
Rebels from God, a Titan war they wage,  
And meet his thunder with opposing rage.  
In impish force they swarm o’er Nature’s face,  
Seize the old haunts of Naiad, Muse, and Grace,  
Invest the clouds, make chariots of the blast,  
And wheel exulting round the fated mast ;  
In Nature’s voices omens dread they speak,  
Croak in the raven’s cry, the owl’s lone shriek,  
Howl in the wind, in rustling branches moan,  
And make the mantle of the night their own.

For Death, consoler, — Death, whose pitying eyes  
Smile on the mourner through the dark disguise, —  
The grim Usurper led with bony hand  
His comrade Horror through the shrinking land,

With touch polluting sealed the loathed doom,  
Then called the shrouded victim from his tomb ; —  
And eyes that sought his living look the most  
Glazed, terror-fastened, on the fleeting ghost.

In cloistered gloom the pensive nun, apart,  
Stilled the deep whispers of her yearning heart, —  
Wept at the sin, when gushed the pent-up sigh,  
As Nature drew the still unsevered tie, —  
Shuddered to feel her smile no joy expressed,  
As fell the pall around her heaving breast.  
Through latticed pane she saw the shadows chase  
The sunbeam blushing in the flower's embrace ;  
Day's flaming ensign by the clouds upborne,  
Where paints the Sun his promise of the morn ;  
And while each fibre trembled at the sight,  
And all her being thrilled to feel delight,  
The voice she heard, she knew not from above, —  
She tried to still it, — These were made to love !



The warrior youth, his casque in reverence laid,  
Kneels at the shrine where she in silence prayed ;  
From sacred lips is poured the inspiring word,  
And holy hands the hallowed armour gird.  
Far, far away, where blazoned banners wave,  
And Paynim foot insults the Saviour's grave,  
His hand must give, his breast must dare the blow,  
His sword through blood his path to Heaven must  
    mow.

The organ's swell, the hymn that triumph sings,  
Bear not her soul on upward-soaring wings ;  
Earthward they float her, where, her home beside,  
The forest's arms defend the rippling tide.  
As, pleased, the moon her dimpling face surveys,  
And gilds the flatterer brook with silver rays,  
Love in two hearts his brighter self beholds,  
And, glad, his mirrors with his light enfolds ;  
Quick press the questions on the soft reply,  
That bares each feeling to the lover's eye ;  
The new-born raptures change to longings fast,  
And, all her future his, he craves her past.

One thought she speaks not, — how can lips express  
The love that fills her with its sweet excess ?  
One thought he asks not, for he sees it veil  
The eye, that droops while his would tell its tale ;  
Feels the quick throb an answering throb impart,  
And hears it pulsate to his echoing heart.

As still old memories through her bosom burn,  
Back with the music's hush her thoughts return ;  
The dooming cross the steel-clad warrior bears,  
And vows ne'er broken give his life to prayers.  
She, bride of Heaven, — the darkening canvas  
gleams

With frowning eyes, that read her guilty dreams ;  
From watch-worn faces set in monkish cowl,  
The exulting fiends, that mocked religion, scowl ;  
Terror, remorse her burthened spirit wring,  
That still her heart to earthly joys should cling,  
And tears bewail the crime, — that He above  
Made her like Him, and gave His power to love.

Anxious she strives, and nature yields at last ;  
The springing impulse with her youth has past ;  
Love, Hope, and Passion vex no more her breast,  
Nor dreams of joy invade her vacant rest.  
With listless eye she counts each tiny thread,  
Spun by the spider for his swinging bed,  
Tells in dull apathy her daily beads,  
Chants the same hymn, the wonted service reads.  
As treads the Arab careless o'er the mound,  
That hides a city wrapt in sleep profound,  
Nor dreams the winds the crumbling soil have  
spread

O'er hearts once beating, and o'er glory fled ; —  
None in her soulless eye and stony face  
The buried heart that sleeps beneath can trace,  
Whose throb could echo to a lover's claim,  
And Hope's fond presage of a mother's name.

For over all earth has of good and true  
Hovered in gloom Imagination's crew ;

Through din of war, in blaze of martyr's pile,  
Is heard their fury and is seen their smile ;  
They wrote the laws, — their forms the shadows fling  
That shroud with awe the splendor of the king.

For hags that hail Macbeth, where spreads the  
wold,  
And fiends that wheel round Faust in spiral fold,  
No angel seeks the sin-encompassed soul,  
Lures it to good, and tempts it to its goal.  
If lighter fancies fill the poet's dream,  
And sportive Fairies haunt the wood and stream,  
The mother hears, and springs with terror wild,  
To dread a changeling where she clasped a child.  
Fain from the night the master mind would burst,  
In dancing forms of joy and music nursed ;  
Yet Ariel skims, nor ripples, Ocean's breast,  
And draws with unseen harp the Island guest, —  
Creature nor good nor bad, — the embodied sigh  
Of prisoned winds, that long at will to fly,

To sail the clouds, or toss the fleecy foam,  
Then furl their wings and make the rose their home.  
The moan that vibrates through the rocky cave  
Where curbs the Æolian king the ceaseless rave  
Changes to blasts when, rent the mountain side,  
The winds leap forth in storm and foam to ride,  
Roars in the wave that sweeps the shattered deck,  
Then sighs remorseful round the sinking wreck.

Sure that no angel form it was they viewed,  
Who met a spirit asked not, "Is it good?"  
Crouched by the hearth they heard the Demon's call,  
And hung the averting Horse-shoe on the wall.

When cares that swarm in glare of day are o'er,  
And on the world Sleep shuts his filmy door,  
How glad the mind its prison quits awhile,  
And leaves on murmuring lips a parting smile!  
Through joys that flash in quick succession by,  
Through glories born in transient hues to die,

Passive it floats ; nor marring wonder chills,  
As wizard dream each day-mocked hope fulfils ;  
Calls from the past the love unchanged to rise,  
The eye to sparkle in the dust that lies ;  
Memory forgets, as bursts the enchanting view,  
And Reason yields, nor asks if this be true.

How oft by day, from thoughts that bid it weep,  
The eye seeks refuge in the mimic sleep,  
And soars the mind, and, soaring, strives to deem  
Its dreams the real, the sun-lit world a dream !  
How blest, when Night's miscalled gloom draws nigh  
To light the soul's, but dim the body's eye,  
Could thoughts thus wander, rescued from annoy,  
Were Ee sure usher to advancing joy ! —  
Oft on its wing the kindly dream to find,  
Home to the body stoops the cowering mind, —  
Convulsive strives, as elfish forms appal,  
To heave the limb unyielding to its call, —

Struggles in dread, though conscious they but  
seem, —

Shudders, yet whispers, These are all a dream.

As morn, unwished for, from Atreides drove  
The false-tongued vision of the scheming Jove,  
Yet still around the godlike voice was poured,  
Sent to unsheathe the shame-avenging sword, —  
So dawned the light on eyes that shunned its  
beam,

As fled the glories of the classic dream ;  
So round the mind above Judea's news  
Still rang the echoes of the vanished Muse,  
And Science, freed, forgets her sterner lore,  
To wear the chains she wanted in before.

Go, when the shades with noiseless feet advance,  
And say, what see you in the broad expanse, —  
Worlds' age-kept secrets all by Science shown,  
Each distance measured, every orbit known ?

No ; — still Orion's sword the gods defies,  
Still for their sister watch the Pleiads' eyes.  
O'er this vast temple bends the pictured dome  
Where Hero Virtue found eternal home, —  
Where gods who could not save, enshrined above,  
In frames of darkness set, their mortal Love.  
So soars the mind along the starry gleams,  
Back to the night that teemed with glorious dreams.

See where discrowned the suppliant Pontiff flies,  
Doffs the tiara, dons the servile guise !  
List to the shout that sweeps the Pontine plains,  
Like Adria surging o'er the tyrant's chains !

He flies, but not alone ; beside him scowl  
The baffled fiends that lurked beneath the cowl,  
That nerved the arm remorseless to destroy, —  
Snatched from the nun life's proffered cup of joy, —  
Danced in the blaze where shone the martyr's mien,  
Kindled with stronger light in faith serene, —



Oppressed the mind in myriad shapes abhorred, —  
Fancy's dark brood, surround their trembling lord.

Take your last gaze where Rome to freedom thrills,  
As her third era lights her storied hills ;  
Ne'er shall again the awakened mind recall  
The dream that held it in a hated thrall,  
When Reason saw, and, conscious of his sleep,  
Shuddered, and vainly struggled to upleap,  
Till on his haunted rest through welcome dawn  
Poured in the joy that cometh with the morn.

Sent from the Ark, the dove, with timid flight,  
Strove through the storms, yet found not where to  
light ;

Pursued by winds o'er restless Ocean's roar,  
Back to the Flood-tossed crew no leaf she bore.  
So through the Past man's tempest-driven mind  
Sent Fancy forth some resting-place to find ;  
O'er bush, tree, hill, she winged her trackless way,  
Nor foothold found her weary flight to stay ;

Back o'er the sea on terror-haunted air  
She flew, to tell the tidings of despair ; —  
Again she flies for fairer forms to seek,  
And lo ! the olive borne upon her beak !  
Hear her glad news ; — she rested on the tomb,  
Saw the dawn break, and flit the ancient gloom ;  
Through night she swept, and heard the gentle fall  
Of angel footsteps in its silent hall ;  
Upborne from earth, in strong and joyous flight,  
Fearless she sought the empyrean height, —  
Gazed on the source whence pours the living ray  
On earth's time-shadows, God's eternal day.

And not in vain this striving of the soul .  
To burst her bondage, and to grasp the whole :  
The bird, when memory stirs his little breast  
Of heavenward flight, green tree, and wind-rocked  
nest, —  
Of song that hailed the sun ere fled the star, —  
But chafes his pinion 'gainst the prison-bar ;

In vain he hymns the woodland, lake, and hill,  
And captive yearnings make more sweet his trill ;  
No mate, responsive to his warbling, flies,  
With him his grief begins, with him it dies.

But when the soul has glimpse of brighter day,  
And frets to burst its dungeon-wall of clay,  
By earnest striving are its wings made strong,  
And earnest yearnings give new power to song.  
From other hearts come echoes to the strain  
That breathes, This life is but a captive pain.  
So, to the fuel that it feeds on bound,  
Leaps the live flame to pierce the dark profound,  
Darts quivering up, retreats again to try,  
Through sooty vista, for a glimpse of sky ;  
Still, as its rage the crackling log consumes,  
The more it strives, the more its light illumines,  
While other flames upspring in spiral dance,  
And radiate warmth with every upward glance.

Yet not alone from night, and haunted rill,  
And charnel-house, have flown the shapes of ill ; —  
From costly shrine, by holy zeal adored,  
With witch and phantom, flies the Temple's lord.

As sings the Poet, once the Tempter came,  
Disguised in angel feature, garb, and name,  
Received glad welcome, set the wily snare,  
And scattered fear and doubt with pious air ;  
Till gleams from Heaven around his forehead played,  
Flashed on the mask, — the leering fiend displayed ; —

So in the light stands Mars, the blood-defiled,  
The scowling demon who a godhead smiled.

What though the homage lingers still, that wept  
Beside the tomb where Hector's ashes slept ?  
Though Freedom's self beholds her Nation's lord  
Stand like Orion, with uplifted sword,  
Raised to the stars, for heart untaught to swerve,  
The stalwart arm, the death-defying nerve ;

Though with the notes of terror Europe rings,  
The reaper, War, to gleaning Famine sings ; —  
'T is but the dream that whispered words of ill,  
The false-tongued dream, whose accents linger still.

Home from the hall, whence oft his trembling voice,  
Heard through the world, bade sorrowing hearts  
    rejoice,  
The car of triumph, though the dark plumes wave,  
Bear the true hero to his village grave.

Give Fancy rein ; — the varying shadows rise  
From olden times, and play along the skies ;  
To build the fabled boast of other days,  
The stars in clusters blend their tiny rays ;  
And treads the Hero, as of old he trod,  
Clothed in the strength that made him felt a god.

Gaze once again ; — when truth and knowledge  
    lead,  
No more the heavens bestow the warrior's meed ;

No more the stars incite to rage the soul,  
But, each a world, in solemn order roll ;  
Peace wraps the mind, as falls the softened light  
In milder radiance on the undazzled sight :  
Lighted by them, are seen enthroned on high,  
Virtue and Love, the exemplars of the sky.

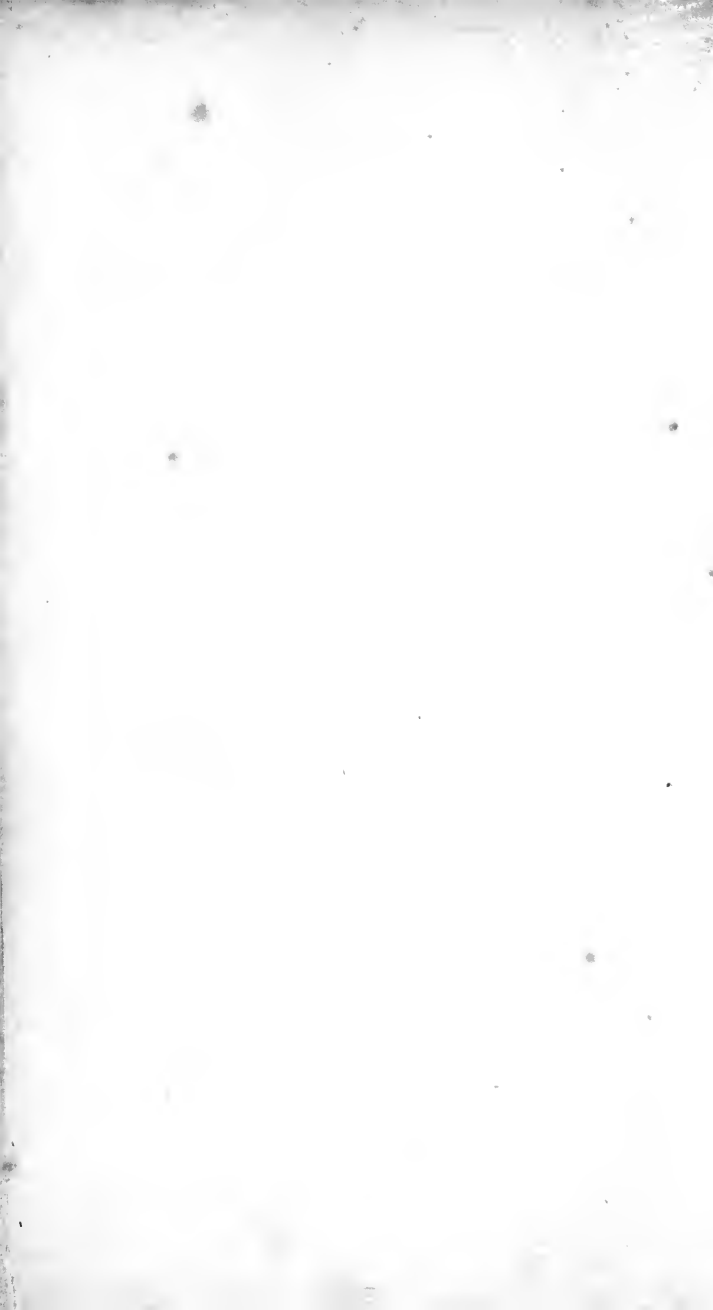
As now my thoughts like clustering bees have  
    clung  
To thee, my Horse-shoe, o'er the lintel hung,  
The future bard, with song more richly fraught, —  
Some revered wrong the nucleus of his thought,  
Some relic crown or virtuoso's gun,  
Some nation's banner when all earth is one, —  
Back through the past in mournful strain shall wind  
Where demon fancies vex the darkling mind,  
Where light but faintly streaks the dappled sky,  
Nor Morn has shot his glittering shafts on high ;  
Trembling with grief and hope, his lyre shall thrill  
To twilight times of blending good and ill,

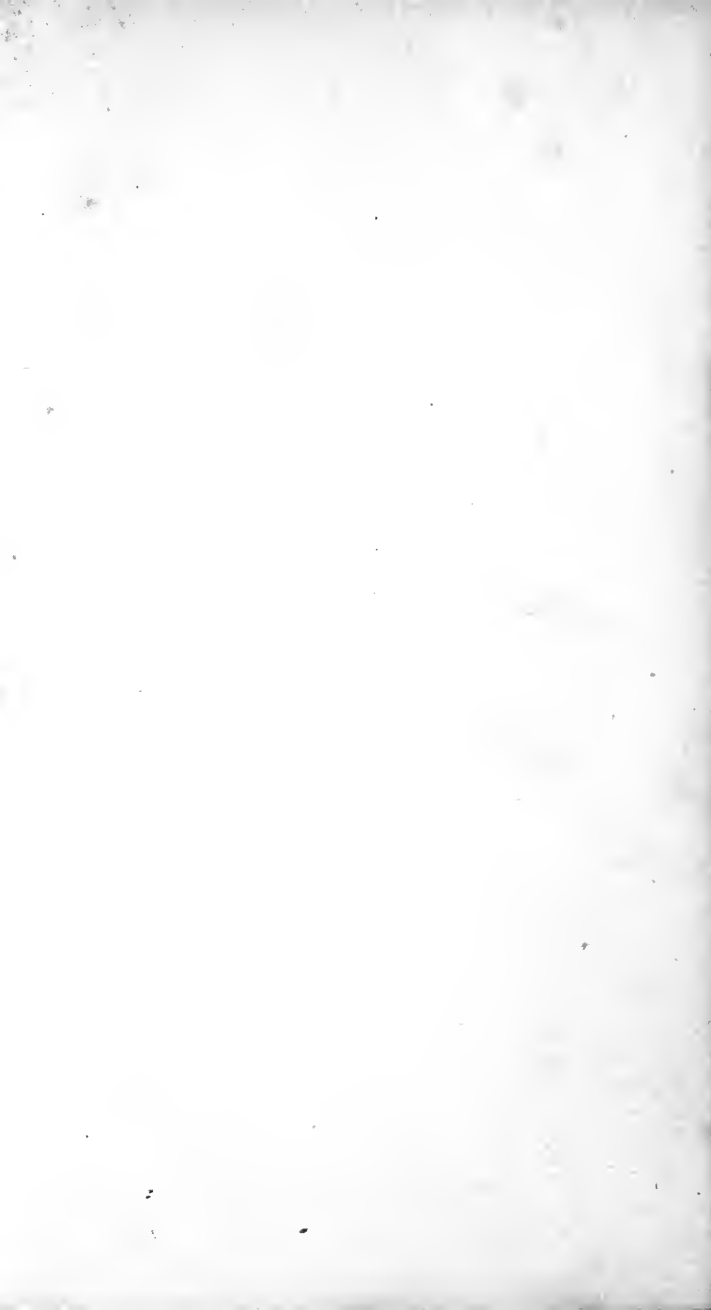
Where whizz of bullets, and the clanking chain,  
Jar on the praise of Peace and Freedom's reign.  
In louder strains shall burst the exulting close,  
That sounds the triumph o'er the struggling foes, —  
The slave unbound, War's iron tongues all dumb, —  
His glorious Present, our all hail To Come,  
All hail To Come, when East and West shall be —  
While rolls between the undividing sea —  
Two, like the brain, whose halves ne'er think apart,  
But beat and tremble to one throbbing heart !















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